What are the Ideals of Contemporary Western Architecture?

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ABSTRACT

What are the ideals of contemporary western architecture? Western architecture has historically been concerned with both developing, and disseminating ideals. These have always been directed towards some form of social transformation, as seen with particular clarity in terms of architectural modernism, which originated in Europe in the early 20th century. Most western architects now would probably say they were modernists, and still, to some extent idealists. Most western architects would say that they were drawn to the profession in the first place because of idealism. But few western architects now believe in the reality of that idealism: they no longer believe architecture can produce social transformation, although in private they might still like the idea. So where does this leave idealism in western architecture?

This talk explores the problem. It discusses firstly what happened to modernism, using the recent, controversial demolition of high-rise modernist public housing in the Scottish city of Glasgow as an example. Then it discusses the question of museum building, for it is here that western architecture maintains a residual idealism. Here, for example, architecture still imagines a social transformation through the disciplined acquisition of knowledge in a semi-sacred environment. The opportunities and problems of this approached are explored through

the Tate Gallery in the English city of Liverpool, designed by James Stirling in 1988, and the Great Court of the British Museum in London, designed by Norman Foster and partners in 2002. The talk concludes with some discussion of idealism in the uncompromising work of the Iraqi-British architect Zaha Hadid. Idealism for Hadid is a key part of her practice's identity. But this talk asks: to what extent does it advocate social transformation, and to what extent is it merely a sales pitch?

FIGURES

Fig. 1. Robert Smirke, National Gallery, London (1838)

Fig. 2. Brasília, view from TV Tower (1960)

Fig. 3. Rene Burrí, Day of Inauguration Brasilia (1960)

Fig. 4. Demolition of Pruitt-Igoe complex, St Louis, 1972.

Fig. 5. James Stirling, Liverpool Tate Gallery (1988)

Fig. 6. Foster and Partners, British Museum Great Court, London (2002)

Fig. 7. Zaha Hadid, Maggie's Centre, Kirkaldy (2006)

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Introduction

Talking to an architect in Europe or North America can be a depressing experience. They might have plenty of work in Dubai, or China, but in their home patch, whether it is the United States, Germany or the UK, work can be hard to find – still, six years on from the financial crash of 2008. But worse, in some ways, is the pervading sense that architecture doesn't have any meaning any more. It represents a complex, difficult, labour-intensive and extremely low-margin means of making a living, but seemingly little else. Architects in western countries experience high levels of unemployment, and in work, depressingly low levels of pay (among the worst of any of the so-called professions). On top of that, in recent years, architectural criticism – that essential adjunct to the profession – has proved to be in its own kind of crisis. There's plenty of writing about architecture around, but with only a handful of exceptions, nobody makes any money from it, and its traditional places of publication have been closing at an alarming rate. This year alone, one of the UK's best professional journals, *Building Design* became online-only, a move that usually foretells full closure.

So the profession is in a mess. To be fair, it's probably always been in an economic mess of one kind or another (it western novels, architecture is invariably a dangerous profession, fraught with economic difficulties, one a sensible person would avoid at all costs).

What has always saved it has been a sense of mission. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as western nations asserted themselves globally, they brought with them an architectural mission. Crudely put, in the nineteenth century it was a mission concerned with inculcating western values (order, progress, civilization) through the educative value of surface decoration. Or to put it another way, you can tell the world about Graeco-Roman civilization by building in its style. (Fig. 1) Then, in the twentieth century (again this is very crude) the west embarked on a different mission, this time to instruct people how to live. The vehicle this time was modernism. (Fig. 2)

We know now that there were in fact many different modernisms: Germanic modernisms of exceptional formal restraint; Southern European modernisms with special adaptations to climate; Swedish and British modernisms which seemed to make a special accord between the past and the present; Brazilian and Mexican modernisms of extraordinary formal daring.

But in each case, modernism promised a broadly similar future in which mankind would live a better, healthier, more light-filled, and more rational life; the modernist future was a better place, and architecture was one of the key reasons why. As a person of the future, you would live in the way the architecture demanded, but you would be the better for it. There is almost nowhere in the world, from New York to Moscow to Pyongyang that has not been touched by modernism in this way. Here is a good example from a city I know well: Brasilia, the modernist capital of Brazil. Here, housing is organized in the form of 4-6 storey slabs with plenty of glass, overlooking open space, with schools and recreational facilities nearby. When it works, it's

very good indeed: a relaxed life in a benign climate, lived largely out of doors, in and amongst the pilotis or supporting columns of the blocks. (Fig. 3)

Now what I am describing here is a climate of profound idealism. Broadly it means the belief that architecture can change a person's life for the better, and specifically, it means a life that is healthy in a bodily sense by emphasizing light and space and body-centred activity. Read any of the professional architectural journals from France (*L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*) to England (*The Architectural Review*) to Brazil (*Projeto*) and there is the same, more or less identical, belief in architecture as a project for the betterment of human societies. There might be disagreement about the details – Swiss designers such as Max Bill disliked the Brazilians, for example – but about the broad principles there was remarkable consensus.

Scotland: an example of western architecture's problems

I want to fast-forward now to a time – now – when any such consensus, and more importantly, any such idealism seems extremely remote. The world faces the same problems as before, but what is lacking now is any belief in the ability of architecture to do anything about them. Architecture has, more or less entirely lost its idealism. Where I live now is as good an example as any. Scotland, a small country, in population terms about half the size of Seoul, was once a place that produced architectural ideas with global reach. Its early nineteenth century New Town is one of the most complete and convincing examples of Enlightenment town planning in the world. And in the period immediately following the Second World War, it embraced architectural modernism for social housing with a comprehensivity that exceeded

even that of the USSR. Yet in recent years, the Scottish architectural profession has struggled to know what to do. In the capital, Edinburgh, a strange urban paralysis reigns: public debate is dominated by voices from the heritage lobby who wish to preserve the city as a kind of museum; development, when it happens at all, is bland and compromised, and with a few small exceptions, rarely popular.

In Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, the authorities have since 2010 had the policy of demolishing all high-rise housing in the city. For the Commonwealth Games, still one of the world's largest sporting events, Glasgow proposed to demolish five 30-storey point blocks as part of the Games' opening ceremony.[1] In Scotland, this spectacle has its own weird logic: the point block has come to represent (as it has done occasionally in other places) the 'failure' of the idealism of the modernist project. Glasgow's enthusiasm for towers now seems to the political elite to be an aberration, the memory of which must be erased. So the city has decided to remove all physical evidence of its modernization in the 1950s and 1960s and wishes to present this to the outside world as evidence of its renewal.

Putting aside for the moment the ethical questions associated with the project (demolishing housing as entertainment), the demolition of Glasgow's towers represents in an unusually clear form the loss of idealism in western architecture. For these towers – the tallest buildings in Scotland, and for many years the tallest residential buildings in Europe – will not be replaced with anything similar, but instead a patchwork of neo-vernacular buildings of mostly no more than two storeys that seemingly could have been built any moment in the past 200

years. The retreat from idealism is almost complete here, and with it the retreat from architecture, for so simple, low-tech and traditional are the replacements that architects are barely needed at all. This will, I think, be extremely puzzling to the majority of nations competing at the Games. Most, perhaps all, of them are building towers with undiminished enthusiasm at precisely the moment Glasgow is demolishing them.

Glasgow needs to be placed in some context here. However puzzling its actions may seem outside the western context, they are at most simply anachronistic. In the late 1960s in the UK, a series of high-profile structural failures in modernist towers made them politically unpopular, leading to selective early demolition. In the United States, the signal case was the Pruitt-Igoe buildings in inner city St Louis, demolished in 1972 a mere 15 years after construction.[2] Through the 1970s to the 1990s, the 'blowdown' (or controlled demolition) of towers became a popular, if sometimes risky, spectacle, and it was a popular subject in contemporary art: in London, the sculptor Rachel Whiteread's work, for example often made reference to the destruction of the modernist legacy.[3] (Fig. 4)

But the demolition of modernist towers, while spectacular, did not bring anything much in its place except for a lot of cleared sites. It was in retrospect an attack on idealism, a return to pragmatism, to local knowledge. This may (or may not) be good for the residents of inner cities, but it has certainly been devastating for the profession of architecture – not so much in economic terms, for architects have continued to get work, but in terms of their moral authority.

No longer do they have a moral purchase on government; no longer do they offer social solutions; no longer do they have any idealism.

So what has happened to what might be termed the 'idealism function' in architecture? It is a good question, because (judging by my own local experience with architecture students in Edinburgh) nobody enters the profession without it. Whatever the state of architecture, a primary motivation for students is idealism. So where does it exist now?

Idealism in western museum architecture

I will outline two places where idealism still, I think, exists – but both cases point up the limits of today's idealism in western architecture. To put it another way, idealism still exists, but it is the *look* of idealism, rather than an idealism aimed at transforming society. The first case is that of the contemporary museum, an area in which western societies have been and still are pre-eminent. During the 1980s and 1990s, many cities in the western world transformed their centres through so-called culture-led regeneration projects. Typically this placed a state-funded museum at the centre of a zone of construction. Drawing on supply-side economic theory, the museum would in theory draw visitors to the area whose spending would 'trickle down' to the surroundings, enabling further constriction. Here is Liverpool, a city of 1.5 million or so in the North West of England. (Fig. 5) Its Tate Gallery, opened in 1988, is a great example, and has led to the physical refurbishment of the Albert Dock complex built in the 1850s, although its impact on the wider inner city is less certain. There was a genuine idealism in projects of this kind – their economic base was conservative, certainly, but the projects

themselves did contain an ethics of what might be called ‘healing’, or ‘care’ (‘care’ is a word that is increasingly used by theorists of contemporary art). In Liverpool’s case, the healing concerned not only the magnificent Victorian dock complex, which had fallen into decay, but also a conflicted and poor inner city, which erupted in rioting in 1981. Never mind that museum visitors in the UK are invariably middle class and wealthy: the Liverpool Tate was meant quite seriously as a means of ameliorating the poverty of the inner city.[4]

That was certainly idealism, although strictly speaking it was not idealism in terms of architecture, but urban development. For the remaining idealism in western architecture, museums are also a good place in look, for they often contain a neo-modernist desire to condition behaviour.

Here is a great example, also from the UK. (Fig. 6) This is the Queen Elizabeth II Great Court of the British Museum in London, built to a design by Norman Foster and Partners and opened in 2002. It is said to be the largest covered public space in Europe; it is certainly one of London’s more extraordinary sights, as well as one of the most visited. It is in essence a refurbishment of the old circular Reading Room of the British Library, a building that used to lie at the heart of the Museum. The project cleared away the book stacks surrounding the Reading Room, faced all the surfaces in marble, rebuilt the neoclassical South Portico, and covered the entire court – which is on the scale of an eighteenth century London square – with an undulation glass roof comprised of x panels, each one different. Experientially it is a remarkable, singular place: light-filled, and gently echoing, it accommodates thousands of

visitors on a daily basis, with relatively little fuss. Functionally it has improved the Museum a great deal, providing a space for circulation, orientation, as well as simply *pausing* in what is otherwise an exhausting and crowded experience.

The architects' design contains an important element of idealism in the design of public space. In western modernism, a defining element is the notion of the public realm, so (to return to the signal case of Brasilia) architects invariably imagined the modernist city is as a park, a free space open to all punctuated with buildings. Such a space was – in theory – open to all, and to all possibilities. Something of that idealism remains here at the British Museum. It is worth remembering that this project, the single largest and most expensive project in the museum's history, did not address any of the problems with which a museum might traditionally concern itself. It did not address *objects*, or conservation, or display, to give three examples. Instead, it imagined the museum as a utopian space of circulation, in which the Great Court was not only a part of a much longer pedestrian route stretching 3 km from the mainline rail station at Kings Cross to the Thames. Fully pedestrianised, well lit, and open 24 hours, the route placed the Museum at its centre, reinventing it as a utopian public space instead of the repository of collections.

This idealism did not happen, but it survives well in a vestigial form in the Great Court. It is worth asking however what remains of this idealism, or indeed if it is idealism at all. One of Foster and Partners' specialities was, and is, the design of airports, and at the same time as designing the Great Court it was completing Chek Lap Kok international airport in Hong Kong

(opened 1998). Chek Lap Kok's outward form is nothing like the British Museum, but it does share with it a number of important principles: both are buildings concerned with managing very large pedestrian flows; both organize flow by providing a single, easily legible space; both seek to extract value from flow. This last point is significant. 'Flow' is the critical impulse that drives the design, but the flow in each case is of a certain speed and density that it can support, and generate, other value-producing activities.[5]

And by 'value-producing activities', I mean, of course, shopping. The Great Court is, in essence, a specialized shopping mall, a fact confirmed by comparing it with any number of actually existing malls on the world. It contains shops, cafes and restaurants, and processes museum visitors into docile consumers. I have to say it does this extremely well, and the space as a whole works superbly. But the residual idealism it seems to contain is no more than that, a residue. Where the open spaces of architectural modernism declare 'here you can do anything', the open space of the museum says, 'here you can do anything – as long as it is shopping'. Modernism reached out to something like the beach, a utopian space of leisure. The Great Court reaches out to the mall.

Extreme formalism in western architecture

I have one last example for you. Western architecture retains a residual idealism in terms of *form* too, but as in the case of the Museum, it ends up being an idealism without content, the 'look of idealism' rather than idealism itself. This is the extreme formalism of the so-called 'starchitects', an elite group (if they are a group at all) who over the past decade or so have

produced iconic buildings all over the world. Foster and Partners' work, some of it, fits this pattern, certainly. A more dramatic case however is represented by the work of Zaha Hadid architects, a now extremely successful London-based firm headed by a very charismatic British-Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid, with a Swiss theorist, Patrik Schumacher second in command. Hadid's work has made a fetish of formal originality – it eschews function in favour of an extreme, and somewhat authoritarian form of sculpture in which a client's views or needs are consciously downplayed. It has origins in the early twentieth century Italian movement Futurism, of course, as well as the work of the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, whose highly formalistic work raised originality above all other concerns. And rhetorically, it has a lot in common with Ayn Rand, a Nietszchean Russian-American writer whose 1943 novel *The Fountainhead* is a manifesto for individual architectural genius.[6] Hadid's practice proclaims difficulty as a virtue. Like a taste for abstract expressionist painting, or Ferrari cars, they demand the client accepts awkwardness, impossibility, even failure. But it is all for a greater good. Schumacher's pronouncements are as fascinating as they are uncompromising. He argues for a new 'battle of the styles' (he refers to the nineteenth century architectural contest between 'Gothic' and 'Neoclassical'. And he is startlingly critical of the idea that buildings need to 'work': 'Functional optimality', he wrote in 2013, 'is renounced in favour of the experimental advancement of social practices of potentially higher functionality.'[7] The buildings, in other words, need not attend to their users' needs as they model modes of living in the world that have yet fully to come into being.

Here is a good example of their work, a small treatment for terminally ill cancer patients in KIrkaldy, Scotland (2006). Looking rather like a F-117 Stealth military aircraft, it has barely a right angle; walls slope dramatically and rooms come to a point. (Figs. 7-8) The buildings users are puzzled by many of the details, but, it has to be said, for the most part remain positive.

Conclusion: what now for idealism in architecture?

Zaha Hadid's work is the most uncompromising described here, and in many ways it looks like a form of aesthetic idealism. Hadid and Schumacher draw on European avant-gardes and what they say in public sounds, very often, like the Futurism of Marinetti's 1909 Manifesto.[8] But I think western forms of idealism, wherever they appear, have always aimed towards some form of social transformation. And the work of Hadid and Schumacher never really does that – as much as they're interested in startling for surprising people with their buildings (which are, no question, starling and surprising) they have no desire to change their social contexts with them. Until western architecture addresses that question again, we can say that its idealism is finished.

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[1] 'Glasgow 2014: Red Road flats demolished for opening ceremony', BBC News (4 April 2014). http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-26857816
[2] Jencks, C., *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1987), p. 9.
[3] Lingwood, J. (ed.) *Rachel Whiteread* (London: Phaidon Press, 1995)
[4] For more on this argument, see Williams, R. J., *The Anxious City* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 107-28
[5] Williams, *Anxious City,* pp. 179-199.
[6] Rand, A., *The Fountainhead* (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1943)
[7] Moore, R., 'Queen of the Curve', *Observer* (8 September 2013)
[8] Marinetti, F. T., 'Manifeste du Futurisme', *Le Figaro* (20 February 1909).